Chapter 14
Clouds Gather

...?
Morning.
Erin's been gone for a couple hours. I think he headed for the archive right around sunrise.
He's not back?
Maybe she actually let him in this time.
Or he's off somewhere feeling sorry for himself.
He could've left a note or...
Are you going through his stuff?!
I don't see anything else to do around here.
Do you know any card games?
These are pretty nice, actually.
We're in a city. There's lots of things we could be doing.
Sure, but we're supposed to be keeping a low profile, right?
Since a prison break is out of the question, it's probably safest if we just stay put.
Safest... maybe.
But I don't live like that anymore.

Where are you going?
I'm not sure yet.
This is my first time in a city.
Yesterday was so hectic, I feel like I barely saw any of it.
I haven't had a chance to just walk around it yet.
Oh, is that all? Here's what you're missing:
It'll be loud, crowded, and full of people who don't like or care about you.
Sounds exciting!
Are you coming?
Of course.

Captain! We've got movement a block south of the market.
All right. Keep an eye on her, but don't move in just yet.
Send to Shrike Fainne. Message follows.
Just south of the market.
Message ends.
Wow!
Can they really sell this much stuff?
It's not really our problem either way.

SMACK
Excellent.
This missive is intended for
Shrike Fainne.
Just south of the market.
Are we ready?
Just about.
This should be enough, but be careful.
It's a breezy day, and the powder disperses easily in the air.
Relax.
We just need to slow her down a little.

It's just a melon.
You must've seen hundreds like it.
Not like this one!
Where in the world did you grow it?!
We call this a desert moon. Grows best in the arid soil on the edge of the Ravan desert.
Desert! Of course!
I've spent so long in forests, I didn't consider the decreased rainfall!
How's the taste?
You could buy it and see for yourself?
We do barter, but I'll take a silver if you're not here to trade.
Let's see...
Is this all right?
A Skieron two-dena? For that price, I'll cut and bag it for you!
That might've been too much money.
Do you know how the currency works around here?
Oh yeah, I'm really experienced at getting stuff legally.

Okay.
Yesterday, you were way off on the horizon.
Now you're here, but you're not raining.
Why?
What are you waiting for?
THOK
Hold that thought.
Boss! She's on the move!
Don't worry.
Moving is good.
WHIZZ
These guys are new.
SPOING

WHAM!
KRACKLE
SNAP
Whoa, fancy!
That's a well-made sealing cuff!
And a little stone magic to snap it on at range?
Inspired!
You don't sound too worried.
I'm not.

SNAP
Nice meeting you!
POMF
Get the net!
She's still up!
There!
Fan out. Wait at the cross-streets.
Without her magic she'll be slow and heavy, but she won't be any weaker.

This is great! It's got so many seeds!
SNF
Sorry, do you want some?
No, there's something...
What IS that?
What's what?
It's like... flowers, or... syrup?
I'm amazed you can smell anything in all this.
This is different. It's faint, but...
I can't describe it, okay? Smells are hard to put into words!
It's sharp and weird!
Okay, okay. Sharp and weird.

Aw, really?
CLANK!
It's Tess!
Those aren't guards.
This is so unnecessary.
CHING
You could always just surrender.
Now why would I do that?
We have to help her!
How is that "low profile?"
Good attitude.
Hold onto it in the arena.

Did you forget she left us on the mountain?
We don't owe her anything!
Oof!
Get her restrained, quickly.
Right, boss.
Maybe hit her with another pellet now that she can't outrun it.
WHOOP
WHUMP!
What-?!
CRACK
CRACK

What IS this?!
Hey, don't look at me! I just hit stuff!
A second mage.
They can't be far.
Alinva, we need to go!
She's not... loose yet...
Hey! What're you doing?
Boss! This one's glowing!
I - ow! Hey!
Back off!
YOU back off! This is city business!
You don't touch her!
...And someone who could tank the fall.
Take him.
We've found our mountaineer.

Wait, boss, are you sure?
Sure.
Target the limbs. Nothing he can't heal.
What?! You can't-!
Talk time's over.
WHOOSH
Come on!
Working on it.
Gnn!
Restraints ready?
Yeah, boss.
Good.
Let's wrap this up.

Are you okay?
Would you just run already?!
Masks up, everyone.
Whoa!
Ah!
Enough.

Damn.
We'll circle around!
Don't bother. They're not going to sit there waiting for us.
Cut the boys loose and then start a sweep, street by street.
And keep an eye out for the elf.
The arena won't want her, but she's a heavier hitter than I expected.

So, where are we-?
Wait wait wait! In here!
Quick, set him down.
Don't worry. He's just asleep. It's some kind of knockout powder.
That's not the problem.
I can't heal old injuries very well, and with how fast he heals -
If I don't get the bolt out of his arm now, it's going to be bad.
Oh. Got it.
Can you wake him up, too?
I... don't think so.
He's sleeping, not hurt. There's nothing there for me to fix.
Oh.
SHHK
So...
What now?

We can't just fight them off.
They'll just send more guards.
You'd think they'd run out eventually.
But I'm with you there.
I don't really like hitting anyone squishier than me.
And that plant wall you did-
Damaged the buildings. It could have hurt innocent people.
It was too much.
So we avoid a fight if we can.
No collateral.
SMACK
Right. So, run or hide?
Usually I'd say run, but without my lightning I'm pretty slow.
Then again, we're all pretty distinctive here.
Hiding might not work out either.
We were staying at the Embassy. Maybe we could shelter there.
Maybe not. It has guards, right?
Yeah, out front. Why?
Well, the hunters could've sent out our description.
The guards use wind lacrimas to communicate long-distance. The Embassy might not be safe.
We could still risk it, though.
A wind lacrima?
Yeah, they send out a little bird-shaped message spell.
I've seen them flying over the city.
Does every guard have one?

Interesting.
This is the third account to claim that the Void Dragon took control of a mortal dragon.
Oh, yeah. Draconic possession isn't common, but it's well-documented.
I suppose it makes sense. They're essentially living symbols of his truename.
But this account also claims a second dragon was possessed by the "Light Dragon" to oppose him.
The destruction of the Lazuli temple. That was the beginning of the end for Prismatic dragons.
That's not the problem.
How is she able to possess mortal dragons?
The Light Dragon is the Dark Dragon's equal and opposite.
He can do it, so she can too.
No, that's-
I don't mean to be indelicate here.
The Light Dragon, or "The Lady", appears all through these records, and I recognize she's had a very real effect on your eternal war with the Void.
And I respect that you and the Paladins hold very strongly to your beliefs.
But she CANNOT be the Void Dragon's equal and opposite.
Oh? Why not?
Because we know what the world is made of and how it was formed.
Six Elemental Primordials imprisoned one Primordial Dragon. Their remains are right there for us to study.
Even if The Academy doesn't recognize the Void Dragon's existence yet, they've been documenting the consumptive "Seventh Element" for centuries.
If there were an eighth Primordial involved, we would know by now.

So you're confused because you think she couldn't do the things she's documented to have done?
I'm just not sure how much I should trust these records now.
The story could've been exaggerated when it was copied down.
SLAM
Don't you DARE.
Preserving the truth is the sole duty of the Archive.
Anything you read here was copied exactly as it was originally written.
To change anything would be to destroy the original.
Do you know what this is?
...It looks old.
It's the oldest text in the Archive.
This copy was written seventy years ago by the previous Head Archivist, Lady Adaine.
The copy it was copied from was written a century before that.
In thirty years, the Head Archivist will finish copying this text letter by letter to ensure its survival for another century.
Lady Huracan, Ancient founder of the Paladin Order, dictated this text to the first of her acolytes.
The original was written over four thousand years ago.

Four-?
It's written in a slight variant of the First Language.
If you're familiar, it should be a pretty smooth read.
An earlier copy was transcribed character by character into the modern runic alphabet. The original was written in the Ancient script.
Do you want me to get the Ancient copy?
No, that's - this will be fine.
Thank you.
Four thousand years...
Transcribed 6112 by Head Archivist Denn Ilo.
May the wind sing the name of our Lady Huracan, chosen of the Dragon Of Light.
This one called Umatz is humbled to be her student.
Though our Lady is tall, strong with mountain-blood,
Archaic phrasing. He means Ancient.
her sight has been dimmed since the Dark Dragon took from her her home.
It falls to this humble one to ensure her story rings on.
I am silent. Her words follow.

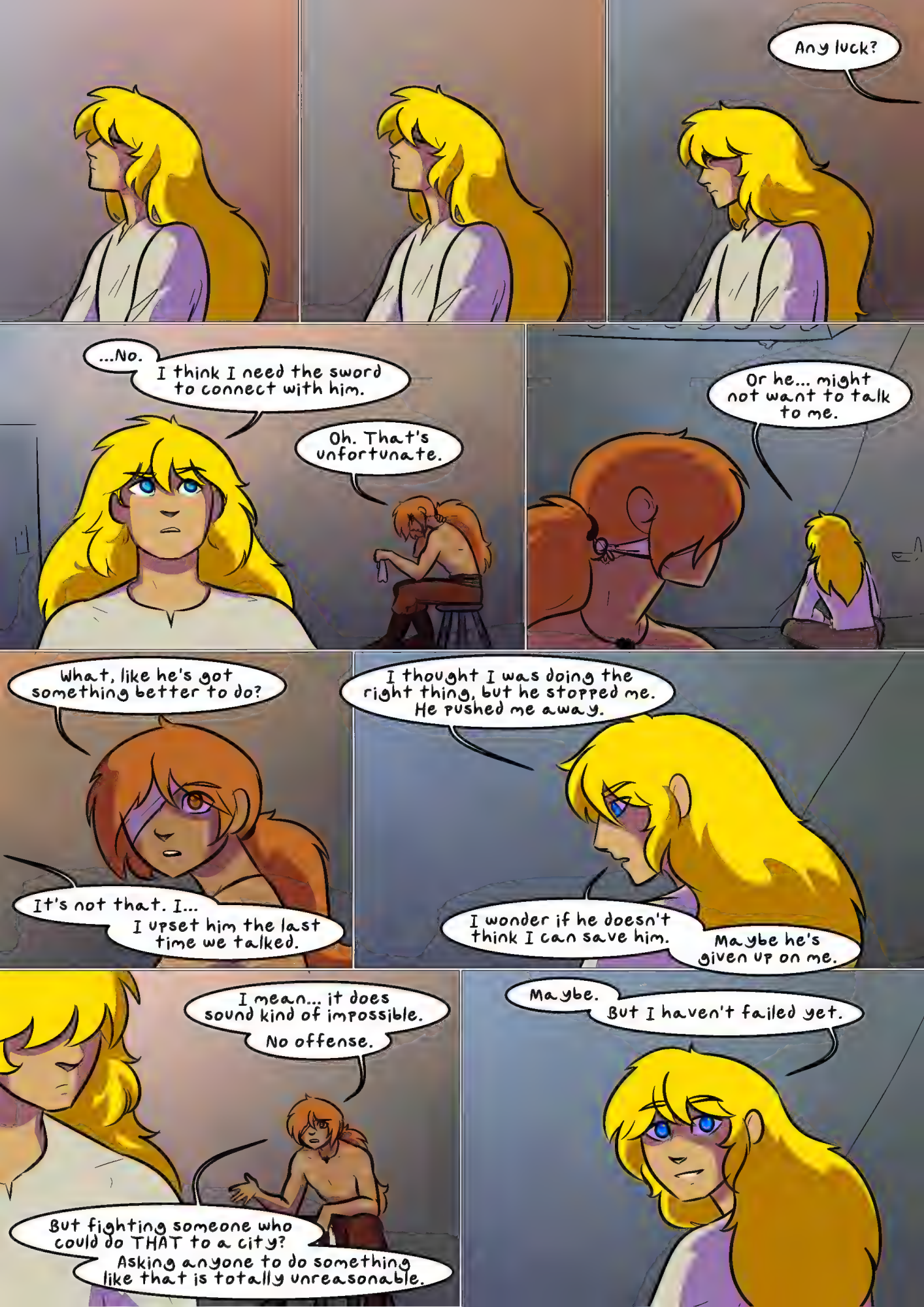
I am Huracan.
In my youth, I carried the title of High Priestess in the temple of the Light Dragon.
As I speak, that temple lies cracked and broken in the ruins of my home and people.
Everything I once knew is now lost.
I am not yet the last, but very few of my people remain.
The cave-folk roam the surface now, and call me "mountain-blooded."
I am strange to them, as they are to me.
When my city stood, we feared the cave-folk and their strange affinity for the element winds.
We were wrong to fear them. They are small, like children, and very frightened of the open sky.
She was alive before the emergence. So... before the Ancient empire fell?
That can't be right.
But we were not wrong to fear the element winds.
Before my eyes dimmed forever, the last sight they witnessed was the great laboratory torn apart by the many-colored auroras.
At the center of the maelstrom, I beheld a terrible pillar of darkness that seemed to slither and dance among the lights.
The Storm. The destruction of the Second Great City!
Impossible. Four thousand years ago is still centuries too late for that.
I know now that this was the will of the Dark Dragon.
I do not know why he saw fit to destroy my city.
Sometimes I wonder if perhaps he did not intend to.
Wishful thinking. He just didn't care.
I know he certainly did not intend every consequence of the destruction.
My condition, for instance, cannot have been foreseen.
I have counted two hundred thousand sunrises since I was consumed in that terrible maelstrom of chaos.
The wild magic must have transformed me, because in all those days, I have not aged.

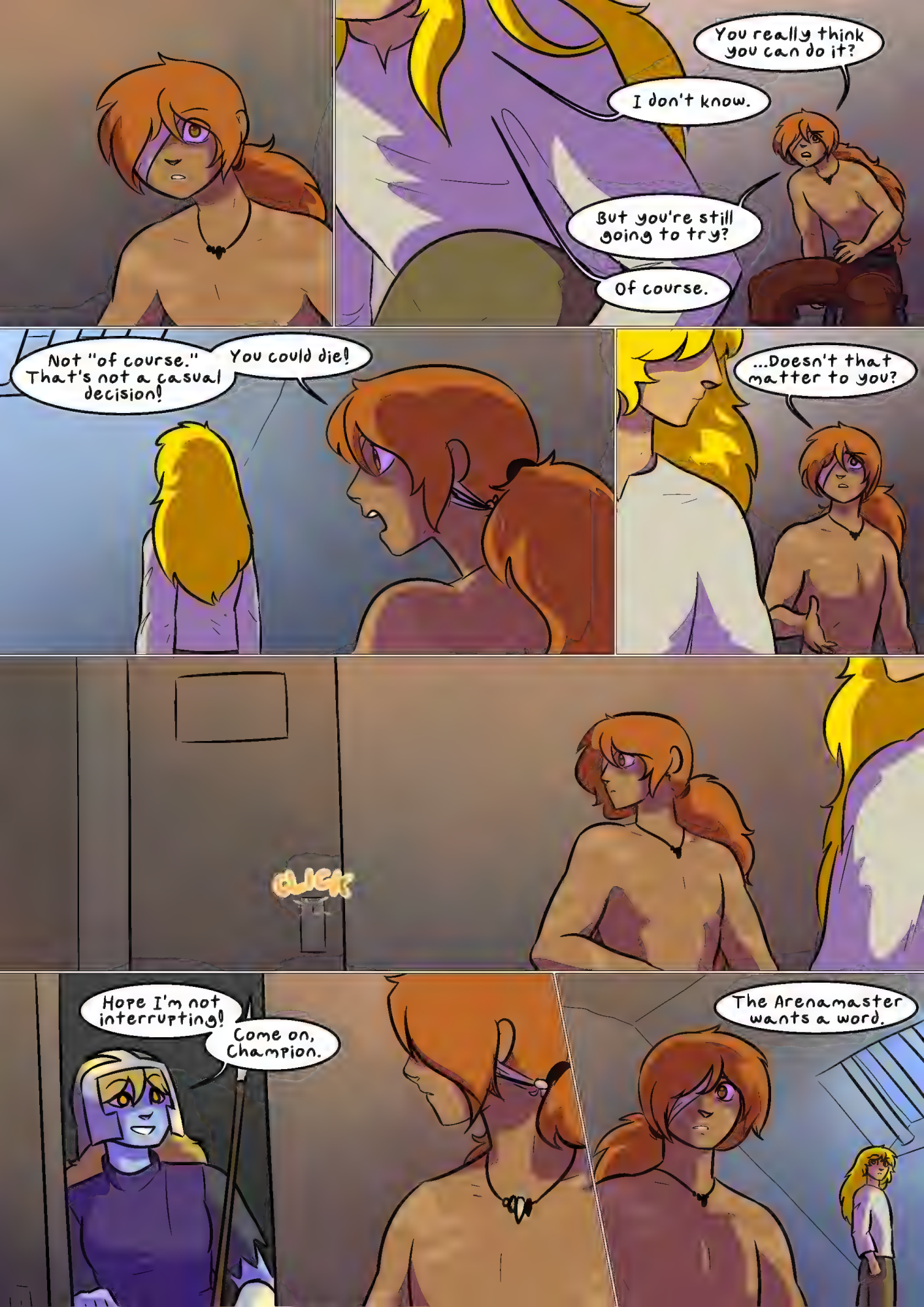
She was there.
The destruction of the city, the creation of the Storm, the Dragon's role -
Even a modern mage couldn't fake that knowledge.
There's no other way she could have known.
She was really there.
How about that?
In the Temple, we revered the Dark Dragon alongside the Lady. We believed they had guided our creation together, gifting us this empty and beautiful world to carve in our image.
Perhaps we angered him.
Perhaps we failed him.
I have accepted that I will never know.
The will of the Dark Dragon is shrouded. No mortal can hope to comprehend it, and only My Lady can pierce the shadows that obscure his machinations.
Through her guidance, we may identify and destroy the tools of the Dark Dragon, no matter how insignificant they appear.
Though we cannot anticipate his plans, we can greatly hinder his ability to enact them.
Anything could be the key to his next act of destruction.
If we strike down his tools at every turn, he will never be able to try.
I have begun teaching the cave-folk the ways of my old Priesthood in the hopes that My Lady will be able to guide them even when I am gone.
My first acolyte, Umatz, has at last forged a connection to her. One sef ago he heard her voice for the first time.
We were unsure if the cave-folk were even capable of touching her mind, so this achievement was doubly joyous.
So long as My Lady can guide them, they will never be defenseless.

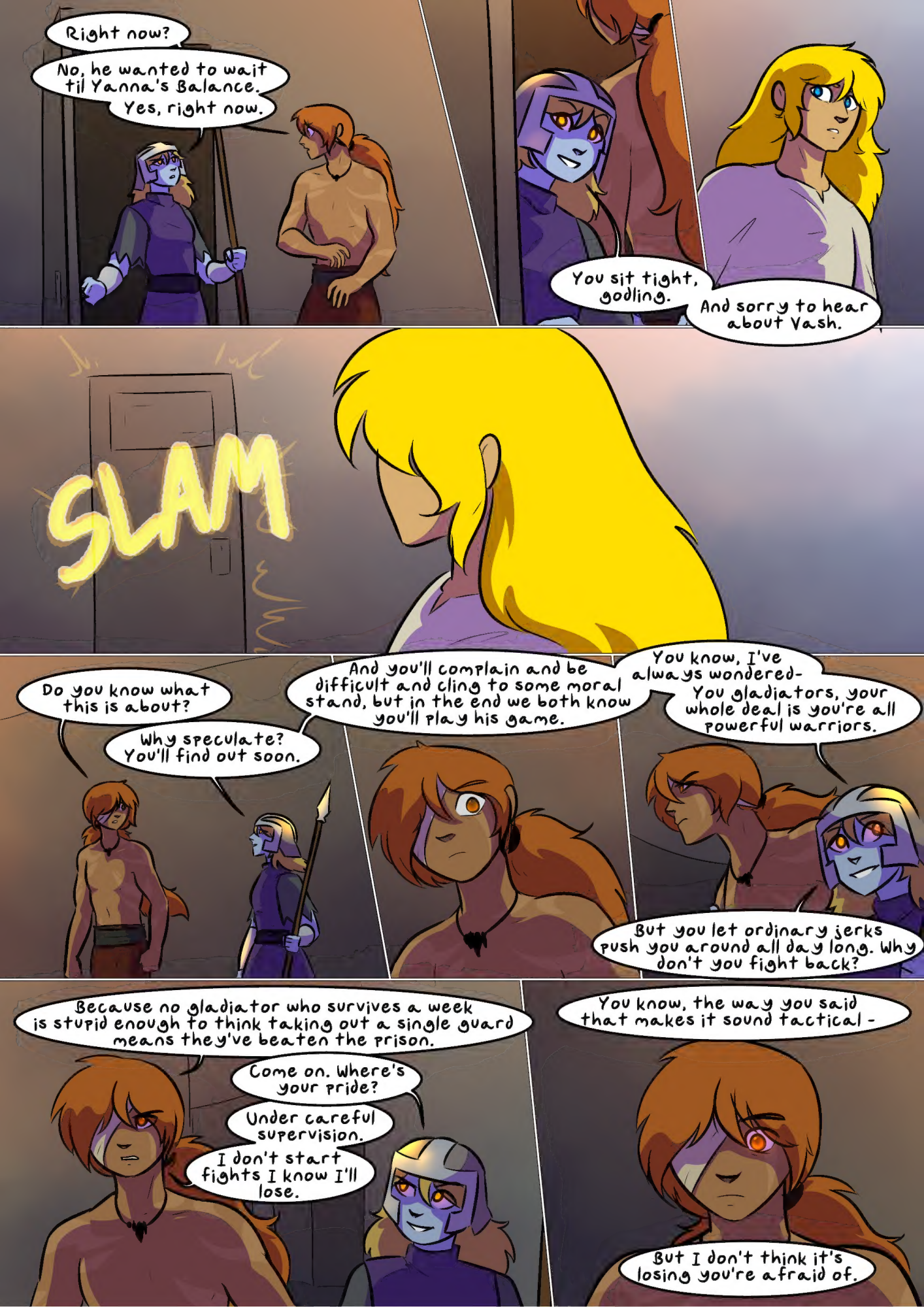
They were communing with the "Light Dragon" before the Paladins were even formed.
They can't have made a god that quickly.
But she CAN'T be another Dragon.
It doesn't make sense!
TAP TAP TAP
TAP TAP TAP
TAP TAP
TAP CLICK
Where in the world did she come from?
Sorry about that! They come in a little fast sometimes.
It's fine. It's probably important.
This missive is intended for
Uh... Erin Ruunaser?
Is that enough? Does it need his title?
I don't think so.
Right. Okay -

Hey, Erin. I really hope you're getting this.
Falst and I are in trouble.
We're being chased by these guys -I think they work for the city, but they're not guards.
We ran into, um-
a friend of yours?
Hey man!
Your friends helped me out of a bad situation.
But now they're in it with me.
The guards got after me because I was "trespassing" on "private property".
Same old song.
Called in some heavier hitters for backup. Professional hunters who really want to stick me in that big arena.
We don't want to hurt anyone, but neither of us can really fight back without doing real damage.
I... may have broken a street.
And some buildings.
And some buildings.
We're really trying not to make things worse, but...
Erin, I was the one who interfered, but they ignored me and attacked Falst instead.
If this was about the law, why would they do that?
I know you... you couldn't do anything about Kendal.
And I know the archive is really important.
And I know we shouldn't have broken their laws!
But please - I know you can fix this better than I can. I know I'll just make it worse if I try.
But I... I HAVE to try. I can't just let this happen...
...I'm really sorry. We need your help.

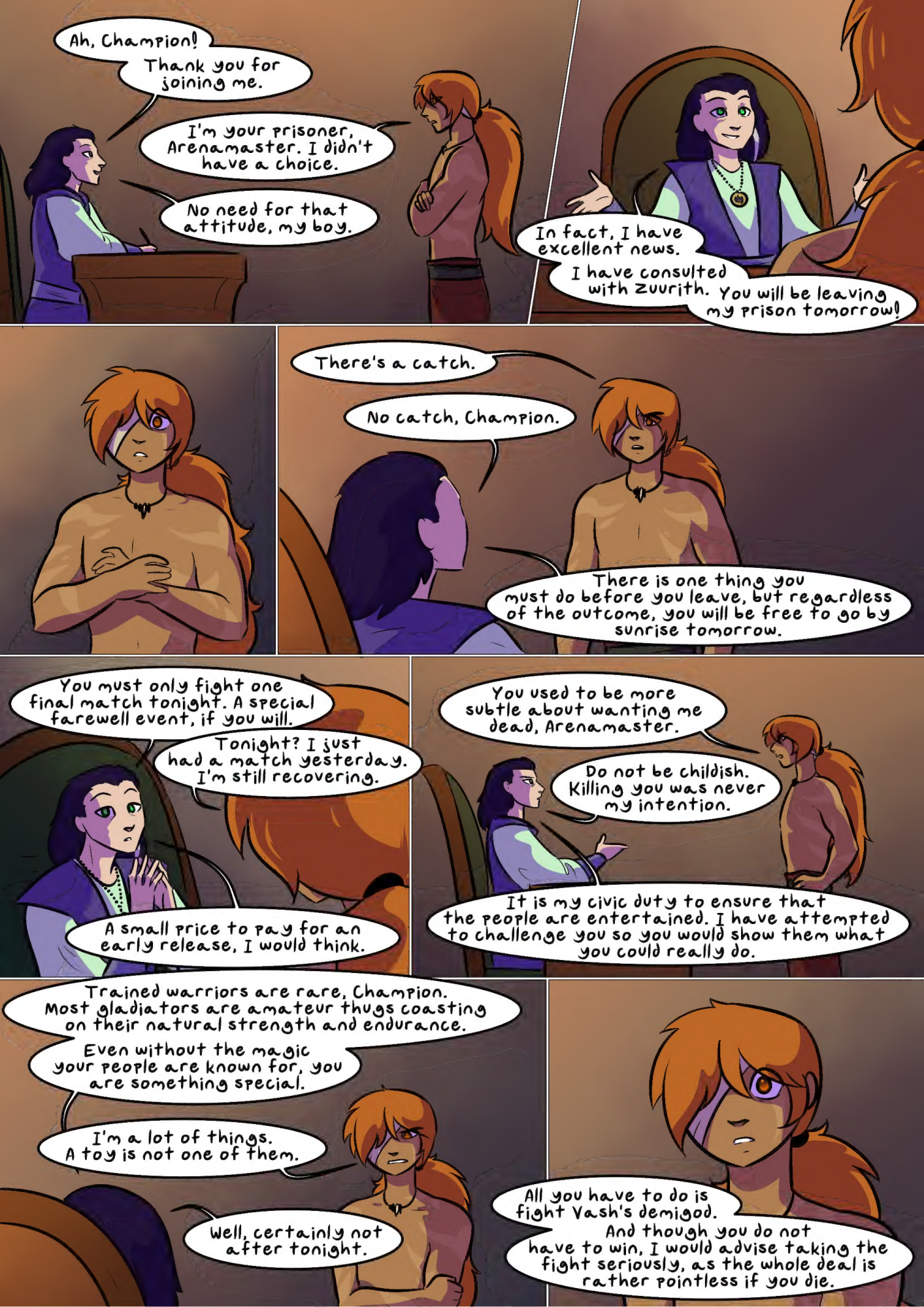
...Everything all right?
Thank you... very much for allowing me to access the Archives.
I'm sorry to cut this short.
Whoa, wait, what's going on?
I'm sorry, there's no time.
You've been a very gracious host.
What in the world...?
Send to Tess Ruunaser.
Message follows.
I'm on my way.

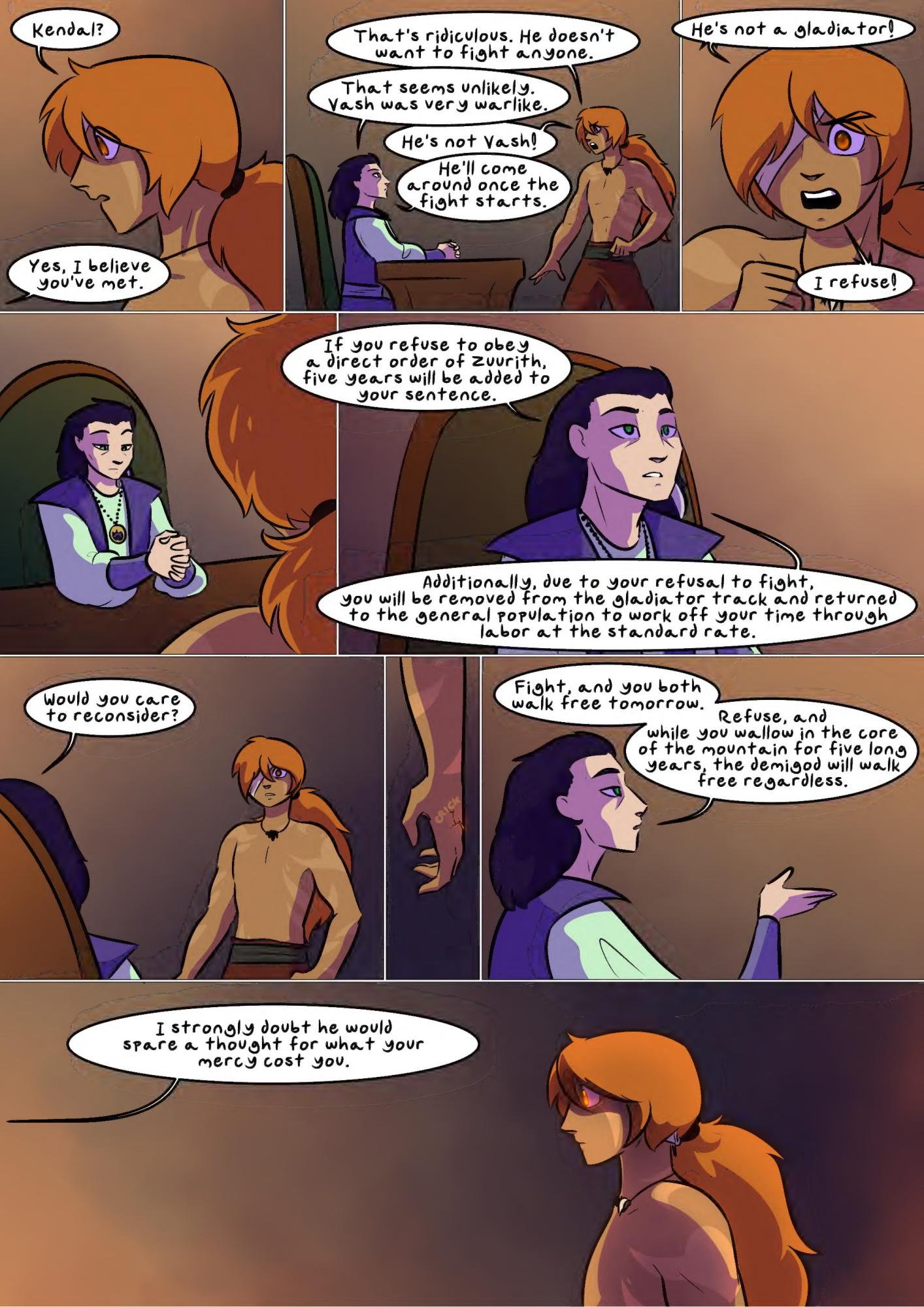

Any luck?
...No.
I think I need the sword to connect with him.
Oh. That's unfortunate.
Or he... might not want to talk to me.
What, like he's got something better to do?
It's not that. I...
I upset him the last time we talked.
I thought I was doing the right thing, but he stopped me. He pushed me away.
I wonder if he doesn't think I can save him.
Maybe he's given up on me.
I mean... it does sound kind of impossible.
No offense.
But fighting someone who could do THAT to a city?
Asking anyone to do something like that is totally unreasonable.
Maybe.
But I haven't failed yet.


You really think you can do it?
I don't know.
But you're still going to try?
Of course.
Not "of course." That's not a casual decision!
You could die!
...Doesn't that matter to you?
CLICK
Hope I'm not interrupting!
Come on, Champion.
The Arenamaster wants a word.


Right now?
No, he wanted to wait til Yanna's Balance.
Yes, right now.
You sit tight, godling.
And sorry to hear about Vash.
SLAM
Do you know what this is about?
Why speculate? You'll find out soon.
And you'll complain and be difficult and cling to some moral stand, but in the end we both know you'll play his game.
You know, I've always wondered- You gladiators, your whole deal is you're all powerful warriors.
But you let ordinary jerks push you around all day long. Why don't you fight back?
Because no gladiator who survives a week is stupid enough to think taking out a single guard means they've beaten the prison.
Come on. Where's your pride?
Under careful supervision.
I don't start fights I know I'll lose.
You know, the way you said that makes it sound tactical -
But I don't think it's losing you're afraid of.

What are you talking about?
What AM I talking about?
Nobody likes losing.
But come on, everyone knows you don't take the fights seriously.
It's why the arenamaster is so steamed up about you.
I think you do care about winning, and you do want to get out of here-
I mean, who wouldn't?
But you're not holding back to be tactical, or to show off how skilled you are or anything.
I think you're holding back because you're terrified of what would happen if you stopped.
You don't know anything about me.
HA!
What?
Ahh, doesn't matter.
Good luck in there, champion.
And remember to keep your priorities straight!
CLICK
Is Tria on her way to relieve me? My feet are killing me.
Oh, I have no idea. I'm done for the day.
Ugh. Lucky.


Ah, Champion!
Thank you for joining me.
I'm your prisoner, Arenamaster. I didn't have a choice.
No need for that attitude, my boy.
In fact, I have excellent news.
I have consulted with Zuurith. You will be leaving my prison tomorrow!
There's a catch.
No catch, Champion.
There is one thing you must do before you leave, but regardless of the outcome, you will be free to go by sunrise tomorrow.
You must only fight one final match tonight. A special farewell event, if you will.
Tonight? I just had a match yesterday. I'm still recovering.
A small price to pay for an early release, I would think.
You used to be more subtle about wanting me dead, Arenamaster.
Do not be childish. Killing you was never my intention.
It is my civic duty to ensure that the people are entertained. I have attempted to challenge you so you would show them what you could really do.
Trained warriors are rare, Champion. Most gladiators are amateur thugs coasting on their natural strength and endurance.
Even without the magic your people are known for, you are something special.
I'm a lot of things. A toy is not one of them.
Well, certainly not after tonight.
All you have to do is fight Vash's demigod.
And though you do not have to win, I would advise taking the fight seriously, as the whole deal is rather pointless if you die.


Kendal?
Yes, I believe you've met.
That's ridiculous. He doesn't want to fight anyone.
That seems unlikely. Vash was very warlike.
He's not Vash!
He'll come around once the fight starts.
He's not a gladiator!
I refuse!
If you refuse to obey a direct order of Zuurith, five years will be added to your sentence.
Additionally, due to your refusal to fight, you will be removed from the gladiator track and returned to the general population to work off your time through labor at the standard rate.
Would you care to reconsider?
Fight, and you both walk free tomorrow.
Refuse, and while you wallow in the core of the mountain for five long years, the demigod will walk free regardless.
I strongly doubt he would spare a thought for what your mercy cost you.